On-Street Parking—A Brookline Dilemma

By Abby Swaine and Mike Sandman

Perhaps the most common concern we on Brookline's Transportation Board hear raised (other than the need for traffic calming measures to improve safety) is the scarcity of parking—on-street and off-street, commercial and residential, overnight and daytime, for residents and visitors. Angst about parking seems to have been exacerbated by increased fines and better enforcement. (We'll take advantage of the bully pulpit to point out that fine rates are still behind inflation, and that the purpose of enforcement is to uphold the regulations, not balance the budget.)

Some recent symptoms of parking angst: letters in the TAB calling upon the Town to end its prohibition of on-street overnight parking; similar questioning of the Town-wide 2-hour daytime parking limit; a flood of requests to establish neighborhood permit parking programs to override this limit; and developers justify-

ing the excessive number of units in their 40B proposals as necessary to compensate for Town Meeting having greatly increased the number of parking spaces required per unit.

Interestingly, though, we hear as many voices in favor of maintaining these restrictions, in effect since 1896, as we do advocating abolishing them. The Town's streets are public property, to be shared equitably—a sort of asphalt Commons, if you will. Those opposed to allowing unfettered access raise logistical concerns, such as the likelihood that if people can leave their cars on the street longer they will, whether they really need to or not. (That is, if they can find a space in the first place, hardly a sure thing since we do not have street space for every resident car.) If street spaces turn over less frequently, any individual will be less likely to find a space at any given time, a phenomenon that has been amply demonstrated in Cambridge,

Southie and Back Bay. In addition, our police express concern that officers in patrol cars will not be as easily able to detect suspicious behavior near buildings if their view is obstructed by parked cars, that muggers might hide in or between closely-parked cars, and that overnight on-street parking might lead to more car vandalism and theft, acting as a sort of vector for other crime.

And finally, those opposed raise aesthetic and environmental concerns; taken together, all these concerns conjure up a miniature Tragedy of the Commons that would seem comical but for its potential impact on our quality of life.

What does increasing parking on asphalt streets that already exist have to do with Green Space and the environment? Several things, some certain and some possible:

○ If our streets are more continuously occupied by parked cars, street sweeping and snow

plowing will become more difficult, leading to more debris staying on the streets and traveling via storm drains to the Muddy River and other waters. The litter-clogged sidewalks and gutters along Route 9, which is not regulated by Brookline, but instead by Mass Highway, offer a vivid illustration of this.

○ The "viewsheds" we value (of parks and other green spaces) will be more often blocked and cluttered by vehicles.

○ If street spaces turn over less frequently, drivers may spend more time trolling for an empty spot; a 1999 Globe article revealed that Back Bay residents typically spend 45 minutes searching for a parking spot. Circling means more noxious exhaust and noise pollution.

○ On the other hand, one might hope that more liberal access to on-street parking might reduce residents' incen-

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tive to pave their yards to provide parking, a practice that clearly demolishes green space and increases polluted storm water runoff. Alternatively, residents may respond instead by acquiring additional vehicles.

⦿ On the other hand again, streets more solidly parked with cars can induce drivers to slow down due to the perception of a narrower travel lane and therefore less room to swerve to avoid oncoming vehicles or opening car doors. And they can help pedestrians feel better protected from moving vehicles. Alternatively, a solid border of cars obstructs drivers' vision of pedestrians stepping off curbs to cross, and results in less wiggle room for bicyclists to avoid moving vehicles and opening car doors

Like every issue we deal with as a Board, the question of how best to allocate the shared public resource that is on-street parking is one where there is no purely right answer. The likely logistical consequences of liberalizing our on-street parking restrictions probably make an even more compelling case for caution than do aesthetic and environmental concerns. Let's look more closely at a dense neighborhood like Coolidge Corner or Washington Square, the sorts of areas where residents are feeling the parking pinch most acutely:

A typical four-story apartment or condo building with 120 feet of street frontage might have 8 units per floor, for a total of 48. If the residents of each unit own just one car, there will be 48 cars at that

building. A curbside parking space needs to be 20 feet long, so at best there would be space on the street for six cars, not allowing any space for fire hydrants and driveways. This means that at least 48 vehicles would potentially compete for these 6 spaces—or more, if we didn't limit the competition by allowing only residents with stickers to exceed the 2-hour limit, and thereby "park up" the street spaces, shutting out visitors. And, as those familiar with Boston's residential permit parking program know, such a program reduces the demand for off-street parking only fractionally; anyone who doubts this ought to check out the cost of off-street parking in Brighton.

The Transportation Board and Town staff have been researching many different ways to increase the supply of residential and commercial parking, while recognizing that we need to dampen demand if we are to avoid perpetual escalation in the number of vehicles residing in and traveling around Brookline. To cite a few examples:

⦿ We have already adjusted parking meter time limits to encourage better access, and established merchant permit parking areas to move employees away from spots that customers should use.

⦿ We have granted the car-sharing company ZipCar several off-street and median parking spaces in dense neighborhoods to encourage resi-

dents not to own cars if they don't need to, and to allow businesspeople to commute to their Brookline workplaces via public transit without fear of being stranded.

⦿ There is a clear, if expensive and no doubt contentious, possibility of building a municipal parking garage in Coolidge Corner.

⦿ The Transportation Department has conducted a detailed study of Brookline's resident permit parking areas and policy so the Board can

examine the effectiveness of the program and whether it should be expanded or modified

⦿ By the time you read this article, the Board will have taken public comment on the 2-hour parking limit at a hearing on April 29.

⦿ A prominent new Parking button on the Town's main

Internet homepage alerts newcomers to our parking limitations, with the potential to encourage them not to import their cars into Brookline, or do a better job of obtaining off-street parking

⦿ The Transportation section of Brookline's draft Comprehensive Plan outlines many of these issues, efforts, and potential actions, including encouraging transit-oriented development and the potential for providing more mass transit options for Brookline residents and cut-through commuters, such as through the Urban Ring Project

The time to lift or adjust Brookline's on-street parking restrictions, or tailor them to different parts of town, may have finally come, after over a hundred years of living within them. But because increased supply can induce increased demand, and because our tangled web of streets was designed largely before car ownership became ubiquitous, we should act carefully lest we do something that has unintended and adverse consequences for our asphalt-and-green-space urban ecosystem.

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